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Introduction

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War may not be "a biological necessity," as General Friedrich von Bernhardt once claimed,[1] but if history is a reliable indicator, it does seem to have been a necessity more often for one gender than for the other. More than any other endeavor, war seems to 'take the measure of a man,' and perhaps this is why men have been so singularly fascinated by it. This, at least, is the conviction of a number of commentators on men in battle, among them former Marine William Broyles, Jr., who in an oft-cited *Esquire* essay, "Why Men Love War," emphatically declares, "War is the enduring condition of man, period."[2] It is this canard—that war is the exclusive province of men, a closed and gendered activity inscribed by myth, informed by ritual, and enacted solely through the power relations of patriarchy—that I would hope to dispel in this introduction.

Any intelligent discussion of gender and war must necessarily begin from the premise, advanced by Jean Bethke Elshtain in her influential book *Women and War*, that "war is the cultural property of peoples,"[3] a system of "collective violence" in which women participate equally with men, in which complicity is shared, and for which all citizens must ultimately bear responsibility. "Wars," she quite logically points out, "are not men's property"; "rather, wars destroy and bring into being men *and* women as particular *identities* by canalizing energy and giving permission to narrate."[4] "Perhaps," she is led to remark, "we are not strangers to one another after all."[5]

It is in this spirit of collaboration, of a shared acknowledgement that 'we're all in this together,' that I wish to introduce the following essays. The articles on gender and war assembled for this special double issue of *Vietnam Generation* represent the most current, vital, and sophisticated discourse on the subject to date. The range of opinion in the essays collected here attests to the remarkable dedication of scholars working in the related fields of feminism, masculinism, gender studies, and Vietnam war studies. The diversity of thought in these collected essays is manifestly prodigious: the recent surge in popularity of paramilitarism; the still unacknowledged post-war trauma of the women who served in Vietnam; mass media's role in promulgating divisive stereotypes about men, women, and war; the recent proliferation of Vietnam-inspired fiction by women; the pernicious effects of masculinism, both as cultural phenomenon and psychological signifier; recent trends in feminist scholarship on gender and war; the genesis and impact of the

women's peace movement; and the inexorable march through our nuclear present are among the subjects explored by the contributors.

Examining the recent proliferation of narrative and visual texts devoted to militarized role-playing (mercenaries, vigilantes, and modern-day desperados), William Gibson traces the rise of "paramilitary culture," as an expression of male "regeneration through violence." The commercial success of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, and such related industries as gun shows, paramilitary camps, and *Soldier of Fortune's* enormously popular annual convention, point to a disturbing trend among men in the post-Vietnam era, individuals who wish not merely to mythologize but enact and perpetuate male rituals of violence.

While noncombatant men engage in simulated warfare, and while the real post-war suffering of male Vietnam veterans continues to receive increased attention, the experiences of women who served in Vietnam remain marginalized. Although, not surprisingly, estimates vary, between 15,000 and 50,000 American women served in Vietnam, half in a military capacity, half in civilian posts, yet for many years their stories remained untold. Mark Baker's oral history *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981) first brought the plight of women veterans to public attention, but it was Lynda Van Devanter's groundbreaking memoir *Home Before Morning: The True Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (1983) that provided the impetus for women veterans to publish their accounts of the war. Oral histories like *A Piece of My Heart* (1985), *Nurses in Vietnam* (1987), and *In the Combat Zone* (1987) reveal that American women were subjected to the same stresses as their male co-workers, yet the effect of this stress was either dismissed or ignored. Since the war, women veterans have reported in ever increasing numbers the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), including severe adjustment problems, marital breakups, difficulty in holding civilian jobs, alcoholism, drug addiction, promiscuity, and illness, both psychological and physical. That the high incidence of PTSD among women veterans has gone largely unpublicized—and unrecognized by official agencies like the Veterans Administration—is one of the central issues raised in these texts.

In her survey of women veterans' literature, Renny Christopher points up the paradoxical position of women, both in-country and back in The World. "Having absorbed the gender role stereotypes of the larger American society," she writes, "these women expected to submerge their own needs, and to take care of the men, whose role as combat soldiers was valued more highly than that of nurses or other 'support' personnel." Moreover, many returning women veterans found the women's movement unresponsive to their needs, in part, a manifestation of their own ambivalent feelings about serving the war effort during a period of anti-war and feminist ferment back home.

An intimate exploration of the continued marginalization of female veterans is provided by David Berman, whose interviews with two medical surgical nurses, Lois Shirley and Kathie Trew Swazuk, speak to

the unremitting post-war anguish of the American women who served in Vietnam. What emerges from these interviews is a harrowing portrait of the waste and devastation wreaked by the war in Vietnam, and of the indomitability and physical fortitude of the women who chose to work among the carnage.

Cheryl Shell's analysis of Kathryn Marshall's *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975*, and of current television portrayals of American women in Vietnam, corroborates and extends the issues raised in Berman's interviews. As Shell notes, popular representations of women veterans in both the mass media and written texts "reinforce all our stereotypes about war and nurses." As she points out, the complexity of the Vietnam experience, and our national failure to confront the plight of women veterans, has resulted in the further trivialization of women's role in wartime.

In a related essay, M. Elaine Dolan Brown explores the unsatisfactory treatment of gender issues in both daytime and prime time television series. Packaged for a mass audience, these media portrayals routinely capitalize on the tired but commercially successful formula of drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll, propagating damaging stereotypes of tormented Vietnam veterans and the women who alternately love and are abused by them.

Serious attempts to come to grips with the persistent specter of Vietnam are found in the growing body of short fiction by women. In her comprehensive bibliographic survey of women's short fiction, Susanne Carter introduces an unsentimentalized canon of literature by women. Aimed not at the 'cathartic' resolution of the Vietnam-inspired literature of the 70s and 80s, but rather seeking to overturn the romanticized, highly didactic male Vietnam texts, this body of short fiction "depicts war's special brand of horror and shows how it affects both veterans and civilians, often the overlooked indirect victims of war."

James Aubrey's analysis of the writings of Maxine Hong Kingston further establishes the legitimate role of the Vietnam war in serious fiction. As Aubrey demonstrates, Kingston's works reveal a preoccupation with war, both as a source of national and intensely personal conflict. Her best known work, *The Woman Warrior*, "reads like a feminist autobiography in which Kingston learns to wield her pen like a weapon." The tension in Kingston's work between "the woman" and "the warrior" may reveal her own ambivalence about coming of age as a Chinese-American woman in an Anglo, male dominated culture.

It is the tension within white male culture itself that Alan Farrell seeks to elucidate in his provocative essay, "As Soldier Lads March By." "Reading" the military through the rarified lens of the academic establishment, Farrell suggests that a disjunction exists between scholars and veterans, a chasm of misunderstanding unbridgeable by the "rational" logicians of higher education, those arbiters of "truth" who seek always "the comfort of order." "The thought of obedience without the right to question, challenge, modify, accuse, recuse terrifies intellectuals and

represents one of the great threats held out by military service." As long as the academic ethos runs counter to that of the military, Farrell asserts, conflict will ensue and chaos will prevail.

The language of war is inherently sexist, a misogynistic rhetoric of dehumanization, violence, and phallocentric posturing. Nancy Anisfield critiques a number of Vietnam war narratives, revealing a pattern of linguistic brutality, diminishment, and fetishization, a male lexicon of combat, in which the objectification of women's bodies and the vulgarization of female sexuality lead to a buried "subscript" of dominance and abuse.

Anti-feminist backlash in male writings of the Vietnam war is the subject of Lorrie Smith's analysis of several critically acclaimed Vietnam texts. Through feminist readings of John Wheelers *Touched by Fire*, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, and Tim O'Brien's metafictional *Esquire* article, "How To Tell a True War Story," Smith establishes that a cross-current of machismo and unrepentant sexism underlies much of the "serious" Vietnam war writing. As she remarks, "The Vietnam war turns out to be the ideal screen on which to project anxiety about the power and position of white American manhood in the eighties."

As a corollary to the literary exegeses of Anisfield and Smith, psychiatrist Chaim Shatan posits a theory of "militarized mourning and ceremonial vengeance," a process whereby adolescent recruits are "militarized" in a mythic rite of male bonding and rituals of aggression. Shatan exposes the sadism and "totalitarian ideals" at the heart of Marine Corps basic training instruction, noting that the 'manhood' won is, in fact, "bogus."

The treatment of Vietnamese women, the Vietnam war's most neglected subject, is explored by Susan Jeffords, who examines recent representations of Vietnamese women in popular film and fiction. As she points out, women combatants in Vietnam are invariably depicted in isolation, sinister, alien forces on the landscape of war whose 'otherness' gives them license, not to kill but to mutilate. The brutal enactment of castration rituals in such films as *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and the Rambo series, vividly reinforce misogynistic stereotypes of women, further legitimating men's fear that women *are* the enemy.

Eric Leed suggests that the violence of war—mutilation, execution, torture, murder—is a peculiarly male activity, and that men seek "'certainty of self' and connections to other men through the medium of violence." He argues that "War is an assertion of male potencies," derived from the biological circumstance of man's inability to bear young. Among the questions Leed raises are, "In what ways does war, the encounter with death, confront men with their essence—freedom?"

The proliferation of feminist scholarship in the field of Vietnam war studies has, in the words of Kali Tal, provided "an alternative to working within the masculine framework." In her analysis of selected Vietnam combat literature, Tal asserts that the narrative underpinning

of such texts is "the literature of trauma." The similarity of veterans suffering from PTSD, as reified through much of the male combat literature, and the struggle and anguish informing many feminist writings, "are strong indications that feminist literature may also be examined as literature of trauma." Men and women are not, suggests Tal, so very different after all.

The 1969 moon landing, played out against the backdrop of the Vietnam war, provides the inspiration for Rebecca Faery's eloquent meditation on gender, marriage, and her own feminist awakening. As Neil Armstrong places his boot on the dust of the moon, Faery reflects on the competing claims of womanhood. "I knew, I thought, what it was to be a satellite, with an orbit defined by someone or something else. I thought I also knew what it must be like to have a boot in your face."

The rupture within the women's peace movement, symbolized by The Burial of Traditional Womanhood in January, 1968, is explored at length by historian Ruth Rosen. "In many ways," she says, "the women's peace movement is one of the most profound legacies of the Vietnam war." Tracing the evolution of women's peace groups, from The Women Strike For Peace in 1961, to the current and highly visible resistance massed by women opposing nuclear proliferation, Rosen points up the conflicts inherent in the various factions of the women's peace movement, while at the same time demonstrating that there is common ground among feminist activists. "Peace," she reminds us, "is not simply the absence of war. For women in the peace encampments and their sympathizers, a redefinition of peace, security and defense are all necessary."

The collection of graphics compiled by Kathie Sarachild (who, as Kathie Amatniek delivered the eulogy for Traditional Womanhood in 1968) reminds us that feminists, particularly Third World feminists, during the Vietnam war era often identified with the "people's army" of Vietnam, and particularly with the Vietnamese women who they saw as their sisters-in-arms.

Jenny Brown's survey and analysis of the materials contained in the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives affords a glimpse into the nascent feminist movement of the early 1960s, and provides confirmation of the courage and commitment of pioneering Vietnam-era feminists to radical change in all spheres of social and political life. Drawing on leaflets, broadsides, manifestos, and published essays, Brown presents a history of feminist resistance striking in its intellectual vigor, intensity, and integrity. As she declares, "We have to alert our sisters to the vital radical storehouse in the feminist tradition and get our movement going in a direction which will actually win some of the things we need before the reforms which were won in the rebirth years are completely rolled back."

Jean Elshtain's discussion of nuclear discourse is a fitting coda to a detailed examination of gender and war. Elshtain shows how women have been systematically excluded from "the cool language of strategy,"

a bewildering and single-gendered lexicon of first strikes, countervailing strategies, flexible response, and escalation dominance. The convolutions of such "strategic discourse" may well lead to anomie, an apocalypse of numbness, inertia and fear, in short, "a massive denial of the reality and threat that nuclear weapons present to our own survival and that of our children and their children." Elshtain calls for a new, communally-gendered discourse, that of the "hopeful, anti-utopian citizen who acknowledges a world of bewildering diversity in which we are nonetheless invited to search for commonalties as cherished achievements."

The collective voices of these nineteen scholars speak powerfully to the nature of war and warfare, both past and present, and to the implications of escalating militarism for the men and women who inhabit this planet. It is my privilege to introduce these essays, and it is my hope that the issues they raise will impel future scholars to engage actively in the ongoing critical discourse on gender and war. In closing, I wish simply to reinvoke Jean Elshtain's comment that "perhaps we are not strangers to one another after all."

[1] Cited in Mark Gerzon, *A Choice of Heroes: The Changing Face of American Manhood*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin) 1982: 36.
[2] William Broyles, Jr., "Why Men Love War," *Esquire* (Nov 1984): 56.
[3] Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic) 1987: 167.
[4] *Ibid.*: 166.
Ibid.: 225.